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The work of 'Angels'

Three women bring new element to BLM firefighters

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NEW HARMONY - Hiking the back country and wielding chainsaws in the heat of the day might sound like hard work to some, but for "Henrie's Angels," the three female members of the Bureau of Land Management's Color Country Fuels Crew, it's just another day at the office.

Amy Nichols, Nicole Christian and Julie Brown, three young women who by themselves represent nearly 10 percent of all the female wildland firefighters with the BLM in Utah, have been working together for three years now. While at first glance they appear slight of build and a little out of place, Thursday's assignment - thinning out vegetation as part of the BLM's Ash Creek Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project - several miles south of New Harmony, showed they can handle a saw and do the work as well or better than any of their male comrades - whether they're fighting fires, or working to prevent them - as they were doing this week.

"This is what we do," Brown said. "If we're not on a fire, we're cutting."

In Utah, only 16 percent of BLM firefighters are women - the figure is 13 percent for those working out of Cedar City.

"I think it's important because there are so many guys who do it," Nichols said. "I think we need some estrogen out here sometimes."

The three women work with a crew of nine male firefighters, all of whom said they've gotten used to having the women around, and are grateful for it. Derick Veater, in his first year with the team, said it's given the crew its identity.

"They're pretty much our leaders," he said of the women. "Really - and we were just talking about this - if we didn't have the girls, it wouldn't be our crew."

The women passed the same strenuous physical tests as their male counterparts, and Nichols, Christian and Brown, with more than a decade of experience combined, have also received advanced training on almost every aspect of being a firefighter.

"I'd put them against any guy in the fire business," said Chris Henrie, fuels crew lead with the team, and the Angels' supervisor. "Working the saw, hiking, it doesn't matter - they've been great."

Henrie said he likes to have diversity with his crew, but he didn't really specifically go out recruiting women. He said it just happened that he ended up with more women on his crew than most, and so far it's worked out perfectly.

He said when the Color Country crew goes out on fires or protection projects, some of the other teams tend to pay close attention, but it doesn't take long for them to see the Color Country crew is a valuable commodity.

"Some crews really watch us," he said. "After they watch us they see, they understand."

For the women, it hasn't always been easy, but experience has taught them to feel comfortable, and now they're just part of the team.

"It was more like that at first, because I didn't know anyone," Christian said. "I don't feel that way now."

Coming in together and working with each other has been a motivating factor, Brown said. She said the three lived together one year, and they are all good friends.

"It helps that we have each other," she said. "A lot of crews only have one girl."

Although fighting wildfires is still a largely male-dominated job in Utah, the women said they hope they can serve as an example to other women who might be interested.

"I hope some little chick out there thinks, 'Hey, I can,'" Nichols said.
